Learning Journal 4:

The most transformative moment this week came during our discussion of Confucius’ Analects and its unexpected parallels with Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. While I’d always associated Confucian filial piety with rigid duty—a concept ingrained in my upbringing—the comparison to Aristotle’s “virtue ethics” forced me to confront my own assumptions about family roles and societal contribution.

**Old Perspective**: Growing up in a multigenerational household, I internalized the belief that family meant adhering to predefined roles: children obey parents, parents provide stability, and legacy is tied to biological continuity. As a child-free man, I often felt like an outlier, as if my choices were a rejection of cultural values. My identity was framed by what I wasn’t doing (raising children) rather than what I was doing (career, creative pursuits).

**The Catalyst**: Reading Confucius’ emphasis on xiao (filial piety)—“The root of humanity is filial piety” (Confucius, 1998, 1.2)—alongside Aristotle’s argument that “friendship [philia] is the bond of the polis” (Aristotle, 2000, VIII.1) sparked a revelation. Our class debate highlighted how xiao extends beyond obedience to include moral reciprocity and nurturing communal harmony. Similarly, Aristotle’s philia isn’t limited to blood ties but encompasses civic friendship, where individuals contribute to collective flourishing. This reframing made me question: Could my role in the “family” transcend biology?

**New Understanding**: I now see family as a dynamic network of care rather than a static hierarchy. For example, mentoring first-generation college students—many of whom lack parental academic guidance—has become my act of xiao, a way to honor my parents’ sacrifices by paying forward their emphasis on education. Aristotle’s philia resonates here; these relationships are mutual, fostering growth for both mentor and mentee (Tu, 1998, p. 47).

The lesson also challenged my view of legacy. Confucian and Aristotelian philosophies traditionally link legacy to progeny or political contribution. Yet, as someone navigating a child-free life in a culture that equates parenthood with purpose, I’ve begun redefining legacy as the ethical imprint I leave through actions. Volunteering at a community garden, for instance, mirrors Aquinas’ “natural law” principle of stewardship (Aquinas, 1947, I-II, Q. 94) but adapts it to modern ecological concerns—a secular “common good” that transcends traditional familial expectations.

This week’s dialogue didn’t provide answers but gave me tools to reframe the questions. I’ve moved from seeing my child-free status as a deficiency to viewing it as a different mode of contribution—one that aligns with both Confucian reciprocity (Confucius, 1998, 12.1) and Aristotelian civic virtue (Aristotle, 2000, X.7). The “family” is no longer a cage of obligations but a canvas for reimagining belonging.

**References**  
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